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N°103

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The **Browning Maral** 30-06 calibre straight-pull rifle

THE "SEMI-AUTO" THAT ISN'T

When the Blaser 93 was launched, other manufacturers took the plunge with their own straight-pull models, such as the Mauser 96, the Heym SR30, and the Browning Acera.The idea was original, and smart; but the designs were rushed, did not have the benefit of field trials, and were devoid of practical considerations. The fast reloading action was spoilt by poorly positioned levers that required users to have arms as long as an orang-ut an's if they were to get the full benefit of the straight-pull movement.

Maral Wood. The quality of the wood in the featured model is outstanding for a rifle at this price.

Text: Dominique Czermann
Photos: reviewer and manufacturer

When one of my friends, a gunsmith and long-standing Browning dealer, received the Acera, his first impression was that it was "not clever by Browning. If they'd put in two springs, they'd have had a rifle that reloaded automatically, almost a semi-automatic with a removable magazine". Fifteen years later, along came the Maral.

Getting to grips

The first impressions on seeing the Browning Maral are positive, despite some preconceived expectations. The rifle is delivered in a Browning carry case with the stock removed, complete with accessories, screwdriver, interchangeable , interchangeable heel pad, adjustable rear sight for users who don't like the battue type rib, removable ball-locking sling swivels, a padlock for transport and a detailed user manual.

As with Browning's semi-automatic Zenith Wood, the wood is the result of a discerning selection process and pleasing to the eye. At first glance, the finish seems more than decent for a mass-produced gun. With the stock out of its protective packaging, assembly is unsurprisingly straightforward. The screw tightens quickly and secures both sections of the Maral together without having to be forced. The result seems sturdy and designed to stand the test of time, but more of that later. Once assembled and seen from the left-hand side, the Maral is virtually indistinguishable from the Zenith Wood. The right-hand side is surprising, and may nonplus regular users of Browning semi-automatics. The long, slender cocking lever seems odd and baffling as it looms backwards. Its slightly over-elaborate shape is the trade-off for the straight-pull action that rewards users with a quick reloading system.

TECHNICAL DATA

MARAL

Manufacturer: Browning Int
Type: manual, straight-pull repeating rifle

- **Barrel:** 22 inch
- **Overall length:** 43.3 inch
- **Weight:** 7.23 lb, may vary depending on wood and calibre
- **Calibre:** 30-06 Springfield (9.3x62, 300 WM available)
- **Feed:** removable 4-round magazine
- **System:** straight-pull, servo bolt return, separate cocking
- **Sights:** battue-type rib and adjustable front sight (rear sight supplied in carry case)
- **Stock:** removable, adjustable length, grade 3 walnut as standard.
- **Optional:** as for Bar Zenith: Big Game, Wood, Ultimate. See catalogue.
- **Price:** from 2,390€ depending on options and model.

The Maral comes with a carefully designed battue-type rib.

The front sight can be adjusted horizontally and vertically.

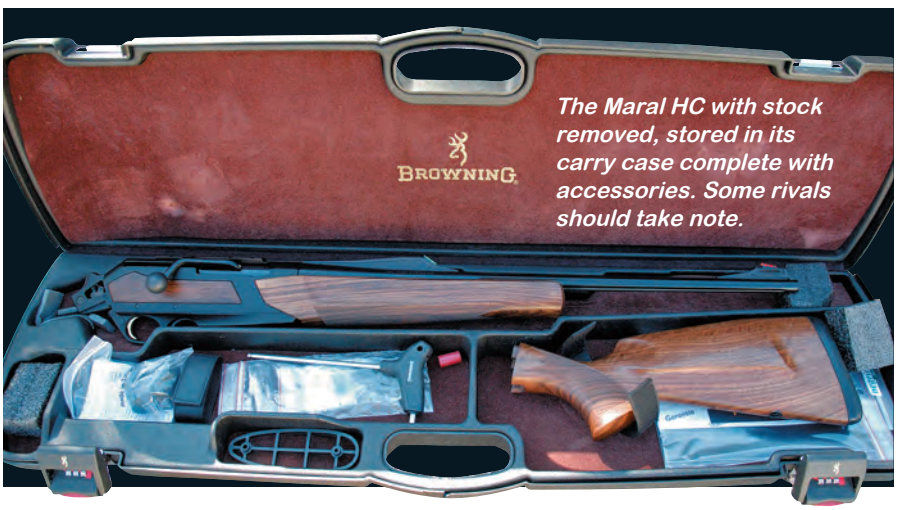
The independent cocking system is an increased safety feature. A clear red dot shows when the rifle is cocked.

With the Maral, closing the breech to chamber a round is a thing of the past - the breech is self-closing, like a semi-automatic! But the most surprising aspect is the rifle's inherently light feel and balance that belie the 7.23 lb of the model we tested. The Maral also looks longer than the Zenith, and our tape measure shows that at 44 inches, it does outstrip its semi-automatic cousin by 2 inches. The media as a whole, and most gunsmiths, portray the Maral as a battue rifle, but our impression after getting to grips with it for the first time is that the Maral is more than that: it's a genuinely versatile rifle, an aspect we'll look at again later.

Like Browning's semi-automatic rifles, the Maral is assembled at the company's ultramodern plant in Portugal, where some sections are also built; the remainder is shipped in from Liège.

Receiver. Breech

The Maral's receiver is practically indistinguishable from the one on the Zenith, which was itself based on the famous BAR that was designed in 1966 and released to market in 1967. It is made from a light, aircraft-grade alloy, has an ejection port that extends into a slit for the cranked cocking lever to slide into when fully opening the breech.



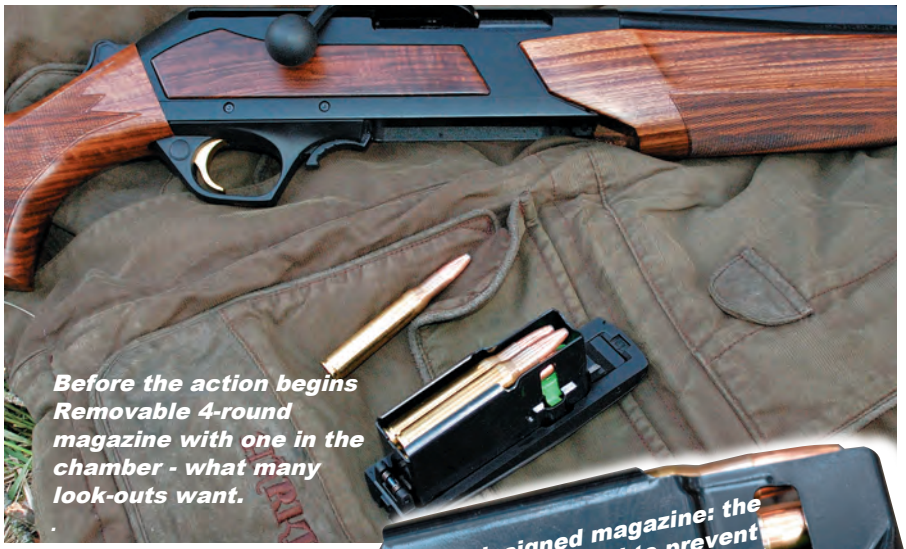
The Maral HC with stock removed, stored in its carry case complete with accessories. Some rivals should take note.

The bolt release lever is not needed on the Maral and so does not feature, in contrast to Browning's other semi-automatics. The sides of the receiver are designed to hold the same walnut inserts as the ZenithWood.

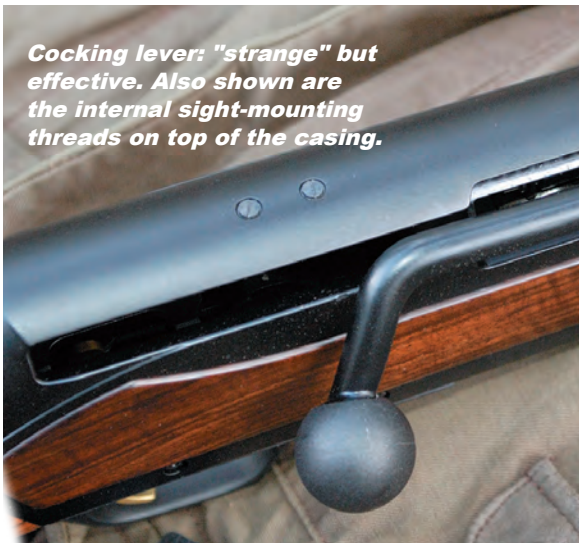
The upper section of the receiver is tapped to mount all types of optical sights. The base retaining screws fit in steel inserts to ensure long service life.

This was a source of concern with some Short tracs and Vulcans, but Browning was quick on the trigger with the necessary adjustments. The breech is derived from those on the semi-automatics. The principle is unchanged, with a 7-lug rotating bolt in the Brownings that is derived from the Armalite/Colt AR10/15.

This system gives a highly trustworthy, sturdy locking mechanism and can endure high-pressure Magnum cartridges, while the initial turn of the breech head during the unlocking action results in an impressive primary extraction. The lugs are seated in a barrel-extending steel insert; the only purpose of the alloy casing is to house the breech and hold the barrel.



Before the action begins Removable 4-round magazine with one in the chamber - what many look-outs want.



Cocking lever: "strange" but effective. Also shown are the internal sight-mounting threads on top of the casing.

Well designed magazine: the sides are shaped to prevent rounds sliding forwards. Note the bright-green follower.

This is familiar, tried-and-tested territory based on over a million rifles sold, nearly all of them still in use today.

The relatively deep bolt face wraps around the base of the cartridge, which is held by the sturdy and reliable extractor claw.

Spent cartridges are ejected by a spring-loaded ejector. Ejection is clean and reliable, but with less punch than you get with a semi-automatic: an aspect that will please reloaders who like to get more use out of their cartridges.

The cocking lever is an unorthodox shape, but it does its job well. It is slightly on the slender side, and secured to the breech carrier by a hex screw. The walnut ball end is very practical and pleasing on the eye and hand. When our Maral arrived, there was a bit too much free play in the lever. We tightened it up, and it didn't move again even after we had fired off several boxes of 30-06 at slow and rapid rates.

The Maral barrel

The barrel is cold hammered, a process in which FN Excels, and is chambered for the 30-06 Springfield cartridge - a wise choice that makes for a versatile rifle, even though, as has been said before, it is by no means the best calibre around!

SHOOTING TESTS

The shooting tests were held over a number of sessions giving us the opportunity to have the Maral tested by several different shooters against running boar and fixed targets, and to rate its practical accuracy, rate of fire and ease of handling. We only used Winchester, Geco, and Sellier & Bellot factory cartridges with conventional 180 gr rounds, and some Norma Oryx bullets of the same weight. It is this type of round that built the 30-06's reputation for effectiveness since it was first used for hunting.

These standardised loads, due to their use with old and semi-automatic guns, can travel at speeds of 2,690 to 2,756 fps in a 24-inch barrel. The average speed of the ammunition used is around 2,690 fps in the Maral's 22-inch barrel.
The Norma Oryx were the, fastest and most consistent rounds,at 2,749 fps. The times were registered using two different calibrated chronographs to ensure reliable results. The temperature fluctuated between 22 and 24° C.Manufacturers are increasingly upfront with this information, and factory ammunition is of a high standard and hard to beat for hunting use - a point worthy of note. We fitted our test gun, marketed as a battue rifle, with an Aimpoint Micro H-1 2 MOA dot scope providing 6 cm of cover at 100 metres, mounted on a Warne steel base. From a distance of 100 metres, the five shots of each test cartridge grouped within a maximum 50-mm circle, with the Norma Oryx just edging it on accuracy. Accustomed as we are to adjusting vast numbers of rifles, ncluding many Browning BAR and Short Tracs, this level of accuracy comes as no surprise.

It is quite easy to keep within a 25-mm group from 50 metres using the same scope, if you are proficient in the intricacies of shooting. The Maral's trigger pull contributes to the accuracy. As long as your eyesight is still good, the Maral still hits the inner target rings when sighting through the battue-type ribs off a soft support. The reviewer shot the target, an outline of a whitetail deer, resting on elbows from a distance of 100 metres on a hazy, windless day in temperatures of 23° C. Four Norma Oryx bullets made a large hole in the centre of the heart; 4 Geco T-Mantels would have grouped inside a coffee cup. The difference in height is deliberate, and due to the author's aiming, for greater clarity. These two different cartridges and bullet fire at almost the same point in our Maral.

Check whether this is the case with your Maral, but it's good to know if you're running short of ammunition… All those who used the Maral with the H-1 on the running boar target found it easy to handle, cock and manoeuvre, and a comfortable shooting experience. At just under 8 lb when loaded, this is something that can definitely be put down to the gun's weight. The accuracy was excellent. The rifle was disassembled a number of times to check how well the stock fits. Several series of rapid-fire shots were performed, including double shots in aim at a moving target, to test how the spring and the winding mechanism resisted heat. Operation was flawless.

The Aimpoint H-1 scope was also removed and refitted, sometimes

The barrel is rifled along 2/3 of its length: pleasing on the eye, and lighter in the hand.

The Maral's 22-inch barrel gets near-perfect performance from the bullet and keeps muzzle waves and their damaging effects from the firer's usually, unfortunately, unprotected ears. Serious tests have shown that an additional 4 inches of tube cut the perceived noise level by 2 or 3 decibels, in other words by around half, depending on the calibre and ammunition used.

The barrel is rifled along two-thirds of its length, primarily for aesthetic purposes and to lighten the gun for perfect balance, rather than to reduce heating as many sellers and users claim. These extra two inches compared to the barrels of semi-automatic battue rifles lead us to conclude that the designer plans on the Maral being a versatile weapon.

Another benefit, and a major one, is that the tube extends the aiming line, increasing accuracy when using the rear sight or the battue ribs. The semi-floating barrel provides excellent accuracy over reasonable distances of 0 to 300 metres, depending on the sighting system used and whether the user knows what he is doing.

It comes with an adjustable-elevation battue-type rib and a front sight that can be adjusted on two axes. Green and red optic fibre inserts are a boon for fast aiming.

Stock bolt and cocking mechanism. Not for the cack-handed ...

together with the stock, to show that the Weaver/Picatinny mount maintains zero: no notable variation in accuracy was found at distances of 50, 100 and 150 metres against game the size of roe deer or a 30 kg boar. Another myth from the world of guns and hunting held by people who mistake dreams for reality. We had no problems with the semi-floating barrel when firing off a soft rest or bags, or from a freestanding position.As with most modern guns, ammunition and scopes, when the game gets away, we're the ones to blame. Getting back to the Maral, the action is extremely fast thanks to its recoil spring, but most of us who were putting it to the test, including yours truly, did not find it to be quicker than other straight-pulls, because of its relatively long breech stroke. Now, for hunting, it is certainly more than adequate. The real speed is still the accuracy of the first shot…

Despite its weight and look of a quasi-semi-automatic, the Maral is perfectly uited to stalking and hide hunting, and would be no more out of place than a Sauer 303 that is pitched as multirole gun, thanks to its high practical accuracy, separate safe and silent cocking action, and its practical removable magazine.

A left-hander firing a right-hand version. A special stock is available for left-handed shooters.

▲ *The steel flat spiral spring. The breech is open.*

The Maral also comes with a rear sight that can be used in place of the battue-type rib if preferred. The rifle seems to be preset for a 98-yard shot to target. Purchasers would be well advised to carefully read the user manual, which covers this topic in some detail, especially the position of the front sight in relation to the rear sight when adjusting. In 30-06 calibre, 180 gr Winchester Power Point rounds are used. All the metallic parts are flawlessly finished to the standard of the BAR Zenith.

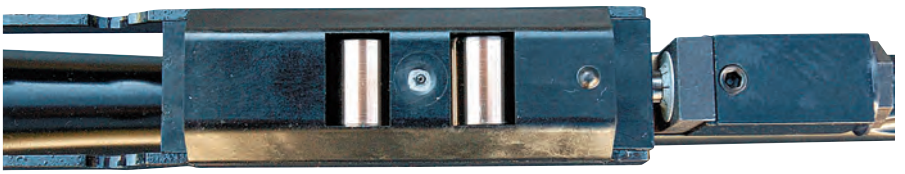
Operating system

The Maral has a novel operating system that is unique for a hunting rifle or any unmodified firearm, although some military firearms have been altered to produce near-similar operation.

The breech, similar to those on semi-automatics,maintains both of its operating rods parallel under the fore-end. But the Maral cocks a snook at gas-assisted operation, pistons, helical recoil springs, and guide rods.

« "This simple yet ingenious system re-cocks the Maral in one action." »

▼ *The double winding mechanism on which the steel strip is wound. The breech is closed.*



▼ *Two rods guide the return spring and the breech in a smooth motion.*

These have all been replaced by a double winding mechanism with a flat steel spring, much like a dressmaker's or carpenter's tape measure, located between the operating rods.

The "strip" spring is attached to what acts as the gas block on BARs. This simple yet ingenious system re-cocks the Maral in one action. The user just has to pull on the breech to eject the spent cartridge and then let go.

The flat-spring-actuated breech draws and chambers the next cartridge from the magazine;gunman's hand is already in position to fire the next shot.The flat spring delivers a smoother, faster motion than a hand-operated coil or spiral spring. The double winding mechanism maintains a constant sprung tension. The steel used to make the spring is highly resistant to overheating, as proven in a series of running boar shooting sessions. As with the Merkel Helix, the breech inside the receiver does not hinder the shooter's aim during rapid firing and is a bonus passive-safety feature.

MARAL IN THE FIELD

29th March, and I've just agreed to join my friend Nicolas Bonniel, owner of Gatimel gunsmith shop in Marseille, on the last driven hunt of the season, the next day. I don't want to go, but he convinced me when he told me that *"There won't be many of us, a few friends, a beautiful landscape, some boars, and an opportunity for you to get some photos of your Maral."*

In action: ejection is reliable, the shooter can keep the rifle shouldered and maintain aim during the action.

It was this last point that tipped the balance. We're near the Durance river, close to the Luberon hills, and it's a hot morning. There are 7 look-outs, 3 trackers, and a pack of young hounds training for the next season. Our aim for the day is to have fun, shoot some young boars, and maybe even a fox or two. I'm positioned in a small wood with a safe, wide shooting angle and a good view of the hunt. Off comes my jacket and I start taking some photos. Then the trackers loose the hounds. I put the Nikon down, chamber a 30-06 and insert the magazine with its four rounds.

Then I switch on my Peltor, which has been my constant companion on driven hunts for six years. Through the wonder of electronics, I soon hear an animal slipping away, perhaps a fox. I listen in even harder. No, it's a large hare that's stopped 50 feet ahead, then it's some roe deer. A goat also stops by, waiting for last year's kids to catch up, wondering what an odd creature like me is doing here in its wood. Suddenly, they all spring away out of sight into the woods. We let them go! The hounds bark as the trackers call them back on the trail of the boars. They pass by. The hunt goes on. Some fifteen minutes later, two shots ring out, bang, bang, followed by barking, shouting and two more shots.

The Maral and the Peltor ear defenders were a great help to the reviewer during this lively hunt.

The cartridges are fed in from a removable steel magazine with a synthetic bottom. The sides have been carefully shaped to restrict the amount of forward creep due to recoil.Although most huntsmen think that the nose of the bullet is deformed in this kind of situation, this is of little consequence for a battue shoot. However, a c artridge that has slipped forwards in the magazine can impair the loading action, which can be far more inconvenient... The apple green, almost fluorescent follower is a good indicator of the gun's status when the breech is open - and reassuring for hunt companions. Such small details add up when it comes to purchasing or using a hunting rifle. This is a reliable, 4-round, standard calibre, dual-column magazine that is easy to reload, detach and insert.

Here, too, the benefit of having the cartridges fed axially from a single-stack magazine does not bear comparison to a dual-column magazine like the one on the Maral, especially when the magazine holds 5 or more cartridges. This magazine is similar to the one on Browning semi-automatics used in countries with a less paranoid attitude than France, and has successfully stood the test of time and of experience in the field.

The hunt has veered around; they're on my right, in another woodland across a field. The Peltor makes it easy to keep track of the movement, at bay ready to bolt. The boar waits for the hounds and then bolts as the trackers approach. The animals have the lead over the hunters.The shouts from the trackers betray their fear for their young and inexperienced hounds, which could be drawn into a head-on fight with the young boar. Finally, the boar charges across the field. Even from afar, he looks imposing; a mature animal, and self-assured. He's too far away for me to shoot at, and the following trackers would be along my line of fire. He's about to go into the woods.A dog barks in pain or fear, a sign that it has been butted.

The boar swings around, crosses on my right and straight into the brambles behind me. If the boar and hounds mix it up in there, it's going to be medieval. There's only me; the trackers are far behind. I leave my position quickly and quietly. There's a noise of bustling brambles, barking hounds and a snorting dark beast. I get to within 20 feet of the brambles and hear the distinctive clacking sound of the old male popping his jaws. Whether he heard me or smelt me, I don't know. Out he comes and wheels around. I've forgotten to cock my Maral and lose two tenths of a second. My first shot misses his heart, and now he's in front of me, charging to demolish the bogeyman who has hurt him. I step aside out of his way like a matador

The barrel of the Maral is almost touching him as I put a 180 gr Power Max behind his ear. He's struck down but does another metre before falling at my feet. The base of his tail lies over my right boot. With the adrenalin pulsing, I catch my breath. The hounds had stayed back, and now they come up. They get their revenge by growling and biting at the brave animal's remains.
The trackers arrive, pleased with the outcome. Time for photos. This boar hardly ever left the wood of thick, black thorns and brambles, and apparently killed one dog and very seriously wounded two others a fortnight earlier. We reckon he is about 5 years old. He tips the scales at 210 lb "all in". His coarse and worn grey bristles and the scars tell us that he knew how to defend himself. My first bullet would have killed him, but not before he had got his own back. While he was being cleaned, every hunter there noted the lack of fat. This wasn't a reared "pig" fed on maize and synthetic feed. This was a real boar, the kind you can still find around here! The type of animal that you often only kill by sheer luck, because they know how to avoid humans and stand up to them if have to.
In any event, this was a good baptism of fire for the Browning Maral, and an excellent end to the season for the reviewer who had not wanted to go on the hunt. As the saying goes*: "It ain't over till it's over!"*

Like the Zenith HC, the Maral is cocked via an easy-to-use pushbutton positioned apart, behind the receiver, which makes it completely safe to carry the rifle with a round in the chamber.

The rifle is cocked using the thumb of the firing hand when shouldering, as with a Blaser, Merkel or Sauer. This separate cocking system results in a lighter, crisper, higher quality trigger pull compared to a conventional semi-automatic. Although not on a par with certain aforementioned German rifles, which sometimes border on the silly and can even be dangerous on driven hunts, the Maral's trigger pull is clean and ensures excellent accuracy. The uncocking action is straightforward. Of course, the safety pushbutton behind the trigger guard is not used.

Stock and fore-end

The stock and fore-end of the Browning Maral, and the inserts that grace the casing, are made from high-quality walnut that rather flatters a rifle with this price tag, and are of better quality than you find on many models that cost nearly twice the price. The Bavarian cheek piece features a prominent grip with a curvaceous swell that will suit most hands. The fore-end provides outstanding grip.

« "Although not our favourite type of gun, this rifle did impress us." »

None of this will come as a surprise to anyone who knows their Zeniths and Short Tracs. The experience is inimitable.

To Browning's credit, the stock is not too long for rapid fire from a standing position, while also being practical for shooting off bags, from raised hides, supports, and crouched or prone positions. Those with long arms can extend the stock with the insert provided. The Inflex butt plate does exactly what it's designed to do. The Maral is very comfortable to shoot in the test calibre. The stock is removable so that the rifle can be carried unobtrusively, but it isn't intended to be removed and refitted endlessly. It screws easily into place with the T-handle screwdriver provided, and seems to hold securely in place, but as with any removable item, it has to be done with care to avoid it working permanently loose and to prevent premature wear. Part of our tests involved removing and refitting the stock a number of times, and did not reveal any issues either with the strength of the assembly or the accuracy of the shot. All the wood components are made at the Browning plant in Viana do Castelo, Portugal, and are finished and fitted to a very high standard.■

CONCLUSION

Although not our favourite type of gun, this rifle did impress us.
It's an excellent choice if you're looking for a versatile rifle with a removable magazine that is quick in driven hunts, highly accurate for stalking and hide hunting, and has no need for removable barrels and calibre changes.
As a more politically correct alternative to semi-automatics for hunt managers, the Maral should meet with the approval of a large number of potential users. Especially since it is well positioned price-wise and sports the most gorgeous wood in its category.
But, please oh please, will the marketing people stop vaunting its rate of fire! Sooner or later, that will come back to haunt us… Ah, yes! On a final note, why not bring out a version for left-handers? Browning already has the casing, or nearly.

After the adrenalin rush, our reviewer, three dogs and the last boar of the season pose for the camera.